

Mahsud Scouts a Trip in June 2013.

Mahsud Scouts look after the south western approach towards Peshawar, it is part of Khyber Agency and its headquarters is at Fort Salop approximately twenty miles south west of Peshawar. MS {Mahsud Scouts} were raised on 9th August 1937 at Razmak as a 5th Mahsud Road Construction Battalion. These battalion were raised in mid thirties in Waziristan mainly to induct the native tribes into military there by creating goodwill by providing jobs. On the other hand certain tribes were not fully trusted to the extent to raise full fledged battalions; Mahsud Battalion was a road construction unit mainly and chiefly task for road construction

Fort Salop.

It is the home of Mahsud Scouts, they occupied it in 1961 but the fort has a history of its own. It was constructed in 1930 as a result of Khajauri Operations.

Fort Salop today is the headquarters of the Mahsud Scouts, Fort did not had any outer boundary wall, almost all the forts constructed in Khajauri Plains by the British did not had any outer boundary, it was in 2010 that Colonel Naseer Janjua the commandant initiated the project and completed within his tenure a remarkable feat indeed, it is worth mentioning that Colonel Janjua has a reputation of building walls around the Forts he did it at Boya where he was commanding a wing in Tochi Scouts. The present office block which stands majestically in the heart of the Fort Salop was also completed by him.

Fort today covers an area of 10 acres with a twenty feet bricked wall all around having sentry towers at regular intervals, the water source is well, initially there was only one well but now two wells cater for the water requirement, there is electricity with generators as stand by. The complete construction of the fort which excluding the main office block and new medical inspection room dates back to early days; it consist of tin roof huts and long elongated barracks, the roof is invariably painted in red colour. In last five years it has gone through major renovation which are still underway. The current project is to construct the bunkers for the troops and already three such bunkers have been completed by Colonel Naeem Sarwar since taking over command in mid January 2013

Fort has a main gate which is a new one due to construction of wall, after a distance of 500 meters stands the old and original building, it had a wall which were removed or pulled down in post 1947. Inside the fort the troops residential area is on the east where as the office blocks stands in centre with officers mess and officers residence including commandant house adjacent. A central small park with a miniature lake, Birds cages adoring it.

On the outer perimeter the artillery, armour and signals occupy the main grounds with sentries posted on the posts round the clock. In recent years Fort has been receiving mortars from

the Afridi on regular basis. There are six families of troops and three families of officers residing inside the fort.

It receives fresh ration on every Wednesday, pay is collected on the first of every month from Peshawar and brought back to fort under heavy guard, pay day is a happy day. The area is generally level with a very gradual slope. There are few old trees still left despite almost eighty years of living, the two oldest trees flank the office block on south. By and large soil is tough, water shortage has not helped in putting forward an orchard worth mentioning and neither there is any crop however small kitchen gardens still add colour to the dinning tables of officers and other ranks. The lambs issued as part of fresh ration are a regular sight, they move in herd and spend the days nibbling on what ever grass is available.

Sheen Kamar

On Wednesday I went to Sheen Kamar which means green mountains, it was not planned to visit it not planned to visit today but then Major Imran informed me in the morning that the trip is planned. Myself and Captain Ehtisham along with an escort. The Fort Salop controls the route as it is constructed on the eastern descent of the Pass. This pass is as important as the Khyber Pass it is inhabited by the Zia Khel tribe of Afridis. We drove out, it was sunny and warm. The very first village outside the fort is deserted now. The original road used to pass along the boundary of the fort similar to Boya Fort in North Waziristan.

The road is a constant climb but it is gradual, on our right the branch of Bara River flows mostly dry with only a silver lining of water, the village of Besai is located on a high plateau with houses well spread, having plenty of tree. As one climbs up through winding road one comes across instances of it being blown up by the miscreants which in this case is Mangal Bagh.

Mangal Bagh is the war lord of the area couple of years ago he was a conductor on the Bar-Peshawar bus and according to the commandant has made money through selling of hashish.

After twenty odd minutes of drive the Sheen Kamar Pass is arrived, it is a narrow pass where in 2000 the project of constructing the road linking the area with Tirah was inaugurated and completed after two years. It is not a marvel of engineering feat but a mark of political acumen. The Afridi tribe is known for its commercial acumen and many a times the various factions have split among themselves chiefly on the issue of having more share in the trade. I met Lieutenant colonel faisal of Swat Scouts, he was waiting with his junior commissioned officers at the pass. I feel bit embarrass in having being given this honour it speaks of the officers. Faisal has joined directly from Lahore where he was commanding the Guides cavalry. What a shock it must be to him to come from such an illustrious regiment to become part of Swat Scouts. He did not showed any resentment. Very courteous and polite officer who seems to be learning the ropes of the area. We drove forward now the area on our left was open green wide valley and on our right it was a mountainous range. Soon we reached the turn from where one

track leads to the right the old pass if one can call it. We pass through another village and reach the last post of Swat Scouts where two tanks were parked in awkward position. Tanks are being used here in direct firing role. Our next and last stop was the village defence committee post.

It looked like any Taliban post, there was one sentry carrying a Kalashnikov and standing tall and proud on a fortified bunker, another young man was giving the sentry duty in the cover of olive tree and another one bit far looking at the approaches from Tirah. There is only one way and that is the road through which vehicles can move although any one can come down from the adjoining hill which is on the right of the road. My interest in these men was to see how these natives fight and live, it is purely luck that these are now enemy of Managl Bagh whom they lovingly call Mangli. The only reason that these men have turned against him is due to the fact that Mangal is from Sepah tribe a sub caste of Afridi where as these men are from Zia Din Khel sub tribe of Afridi's. This is the art of frontier warfare and this is where the political agent comes in handy by dividing the tribes. These sub tribes are more concerned about their own interests than looking after the ideological values of Managl Bagh.

The interesting feature about these **village defence committee** is that they are the true and classic militia which Machiavelli was so profoundly fond of and propagated. The English Militia of 17th Century is another example of these militia; the natives taking care of the town and villages against the miscreants. English militia was paid and fed upon public tax which was levied for the occasion and purpose. Here at **Sheen Kamar** pass these men of Zakha Khel tribe are fed by the Mahsud Scouts or the political agent indeed. The weapons or more precisely the ammunition is provided by the Mahsud Scouts on behalf of political agent; this is how the Frontier Corps took birth. The Turi Militia of Kurram Valley was the very first example among pathan otherwise Colonel Durand had raised Gilgit Scouts in 1889.

We bid them farewell after embracing each other which is the custom as well you cannot enter or leave a post without shaking or embracing each other it may be just touching but it has to be done. On our way back the valley was now on our right, in front the Bara Valley lush green. This greenery here is deceptive because these are not fruit trees rather shrubs, there is one particular shrub known as gurgoray which has small fruit and is eaten. This route connects Tirah with Bara valley and is much pleasant than the Khyber Pass, its only limitation is its rather bit of extent as compare to Khyber which I have not seen yet.

There was an old grave yard next to Zaka Khel post across the track, I was narrated by one of the tribesman as being an old graveyard which was told to them by their grandfathers. We stopped by at one oasis like place to see the caves, after walking through the bushy track led by the Mahsud Scouts we entered the mouth of a cave and then I followed the others, it was dark and cool. The light of mobile phone was not enough to guide but I managed it and followed other, through a labyrinth of turns we all reach at the end which was a circular flat mud end. The height was good enough even for me to walk straight and erect. We made our exit through another way and suddenly found ourselves on a open patch with trees around. These caves are man made they are all around, they are in villages along the way. They were and are used to keep

the animals insides in winter and also the humans. Their defensive value is beyond words to explain. In old times and still the tribes in time of war especially the women and children can take refugee here and so can the militia.

Tuesday.

I woke up at 0730 hours rather the waiter came to wake me up. The room where I am staying has an attached room as well and the person came out of the room thus I was bit at loss whether he is an officer who is living next door or an attendant; it is difficult to judge when all are wearing kameez shalwar and that too early in the morning. It was a bright sunny day, I ordered a cup of tea which was not good somehow the other it is difficult to find a decent cup of tea everywhere. Major Imran who is performing the duty of DQ was my guide and we had to go to Fort Jhansi first and then to the Fort Miliward and back. It looks simple but last night I had a second thought on the whole trip. There is a cease fire with the Taliban and everyone seems to be bit relaxed but I am a firm believer and so are many others who regard these cease fires and agreements as a lull before the storm, none knows when the hell is going to break out but everyone consoles other with these words of peace.

I am still not very much clear about the direction of north, it is only after ascertaining the north that one can make a relationship between geography and history. We left the fort in a hilux with another hilux having our escort. In the vehicle I sat behind with Major Imran and on an ambush laid on us and the reaction of the scout; not a very good feeling. The main reason is the easy attitude of everyone here and secondly it seems almost impossible to stop an suicide attack or ambush, both rare in this area as compared to north Waziristan. We passed Shakas Fort, area is green with plenty of shrubs 'keekar' but not of plantation or crops. Initially the passage out from fort passes through a culvert, then burnt out and destroyed shops a sharp bend, another destroyed culvert and drive straight then comes the small town of Qambar Khel. It is not like a typical frontier town rather an urban outskirt of Peshawar. Wall chalking regarding the election{it is due today on NA 4 I believe} it has been postponed in the initial 11 May elections. The moment I saw few women clad in burqa walking in the stony causeway I felt relax. Their walking and presence outside is a n assuring sign of peace and modern enlightenment of the area. There were school boys all clad in white dress although in Frontier they wear militia colour; could be a private school. I am not wrong if I write that I have seen maximum wall chalking in FATA regarding the private schools. Males were sitting idle on the roadside probably waiting for polling but it could be custom or habit also, none was carrying any kind of arms

Fort Jhansi & Fort Milward

These two forts are other two major forts in the area, first one is in fact Fort Shakas which is a rather new construction it was handed over to FC in 1982. Fort Jhansi comes first, its crow distance from Salop is not more than four kilometers but as the area is infested with mines/IED and ambush sites thus a long detour is forced upon. The road is now a track with often blown up culverts and almost all houses are demolished partially or complete. The area around belongs to Malik Din Khel clan, they are more business like and have soft attitude

towards the FC. For Jhansi one has to pass astride the road running parallel with Hayatabad but on one side is the settled area and other side is free tribal area.

Bara Bazar the hub of Mangal Bagh is now deserted like a ghost town, there are over 7500 shops in the two miles stretch of road all dealing with hashish and weapons. These markets have been occupied by the Khyber Wing of Khyber Rifles under-command of Mahsud scouts. The shops have their wares intact, they have fabulous rooms upstairs with woodwork and carpets. From Bara we drove past Dogra which is an army unit headquarters, the track is in dirt with bushes all around, needless to say that no defence against IED is possible in such terrain, other than jammers but you cannot do much about a pressure mine. At Dogra which used to be a Sikh outpost is now a complex of three factories owned by Haji Ayub Afridi who himself died couple of years ago.

Jhansi is on the bank of Bara River, an old post constructed in 1928, it looks after the area which is plain. There is no wall around the fort, there is a squadron of armour, battery of artillery and so on. Construction is all barracks and plenty of them are here. Two years ago it came under an fire attack from Mangal Bagh men. It have a beautiful Chinar garden as well which was constructed in 1980 by the wing commanders. All along there was noise of jets flying over head. Conversation revolves around the activities of the miscreants, morale high.

Fort Milward is the alst of the forts on the southern edge of the valley, there are two more forts like Kishengarh but it is not under Frontier Corps. Milward had a worst scenario when nine scouts including the wing commander were killed in an ambush.

Fort Milward remained with FSF till 1976 then it was handed over to FC. Fort is not that big but it have open spaces with Bara River branch running on the southern edge, There are Kiker Trees all around with very little space for irrigation. I had a briefing at Milward and also the lunch. Most of buildings have been repaired and altered but still a vast number of original hutments. Families of troops six-ten lives in every fort and face the same music as the men are facing. Light is rare but there are generators and their use is quite liberal.